

Preon [WT]

by D.C. Ceva

‘Talk to me, Niva, why don’t I see anything?’

‘I’ll talk to you, there’s just not much to talk about. Everything went as planned and calculated, we should be there. Just that...’

‘Yes?’

‘Just that *There* isn’t there.’

‘What *are* you talking about...?’

Rezek’s status as mission commander doesn’t generally reflect, they’d all gone through the thick and thin of training together, and they were relying on another in equal measures, apart from final decisions it feels formal, they certainly don’t address each other according to rank. Vagueness and talking in riddles is not part of their exchanges, however, and he already knows when floating over that she means what she said as she’d said it, even though he has no idea what she’d said had meant.

‘We’ve arrived where we were supposed to arrive, and we continue on impulse drive, and we should be able to point at it from here, in some manner we should be able to see it somehow, but there’s nothing to see.’

‘*That* would disagree with you.’

He points at a number of rather excited screens.

‘Yes, I didn’t say there’s nothing going on. Just that it doesn’t appear to be going on here. Or anywhere.’

‘This is not a moment for patience, particularly not mine. Those are gamma rays.’

‘I know.’

‘And those gamma rays are being bent.’

‘I know.’

‘Ergo, and as we’ve conducted it successfully already, the lensing infers, all one has to do is see what, and with that where, which is why we’ve moved here.’

‘Correct.’

‘Thank you.’

‘The lensing persists, as such things do, it’s just that it no longer infers a source, everything I see is telling me that I don’t see anything, so, whatever is being inferred, it’s not here.’

‘But? Where?’

‘Nowhere. Nowhere else but here.’

He gives it about five seconds.

‘Are you alright?’

'I'm perfectly fine, just the weather isn't.'

'So you're saying we're not there.'

Niva lets out a blob of air with accompanying sound that makes her seem one hundred percent French and lifts her hands. Rezek performs a brief drum-roll on the console and peers back at the other two. Cows eyes.

'How fast are we're moving?'

'What you mean, impulse drive, that's 42 000 km/h. A tad above coasting.'

It's never bothered him, the speed, and given the distances and dimensions it was to be considered safe. 'Here' is still a good way out from where the source of the lensing should be, more than half the distance between Earth and the Moon, but now he feels a little uneasy.

Once again he glances at the screens.

'Could something be fucking with those readings?'

'It'd show.'

'Would it.'

'Yes.'

'You're telling me that our instruments are prepared and bona for every possible fuckery, including those we can't dream of anticipating.'

'Now that you put it that way, no, nothing can be adequately prepared for something that can't be anticipated. But as I said, we are where we wanted to be, and we're moving accordingly.'

'Yes, yes... You've seen a marker outside, a milestone?'

'No, Commander Rezek, *that* would be highly unusual, as well as running contrary to what I've been saying about seeing anything. As you know, and as you surely should know as commander of this mission, position in transit is being calculated by stellar angle and distances relative to the ship, and we have billions of dots to have a result confirmed. Everything's fine, just that we've apparently come for nothing. Which is remarkable enough for having come here, granted.'

'Yes. Yes, it is, isn't it. And good recital. Only tell me why, when trying to read our progress and position, I'm reading exactly what I've been reading last time I looked.'

This now finally has an effect, with Niva's head swivelling around, her brow already crumpled in one of those frowns she equally reserves for situations she strains to understand and a perceived overstepping. Both is adequate. 'Not funny', the frown says. The two others have turned their attention to what Rezek is pointing at as well, and Carson is saying it.

'O-oh.'

'No shit...'

'Slow us down, get us coasting.'

'If we...'

'We *have* enough fuel to get us going again, have we.'

'Yes. Sir.'

Niva moves to shut down all propulsion and counter their momentum. The motions receive confirmation. Which is good. Everyone looks at position.

'Okay. Fuckery,' says Carson.

'Fuckery,' Rezek concurs.

'I'm spooked,' so Tayla.

'Right, everyone relax, we obviously got us some of our sensors fried.'

'Doesn't show,' Niva almost sings it.

'Of course not, that's because it's fried.'

'Must be a lot that's been fried...'

'Would you be a little more counterproductive, please!'

'Would *everyone* include you as far as being calm is concerned?'

'Guys, please, this isn't helping.'

Tayla is right, it isn't helping. Niva conducts a full system check.

'So...' Carson is struggling. 'Are we moving?'

‘This says we are.’ Niva helpfully points at what signifies thruster activity and propulsion flow. ‘We’re slowing down, which means that we’d been moving faster before. And this...,’ she points at position, ‘...so says we don’t.’

‘Right.’ Carson is still struggling. ‘What does that mean?’

‘It means the damn thing is stuck.’ Rezek catches a predictably raised eyebrow on Niva’s profile. ‘You disagree?’

‘I think we shouldn’t rush into conclusions. Something’s going on.’

‘Well, that’s at least an improvement to all those nothings.’

‘I wouldn’t be too sure about that either.’

Somewhere, deep inside him, Rezek knows that this is a good recommendation. But this somewhere is a dark place, veiled in magnetically charged nebulae, ominous, and cold. It’s a place of fear. And he can smell the fear in Carson and Tayla. He’s in charge. First responsibility of a commander is keeping the shit together.

‘What does the check say.’

‘Check says everything’s fine, rosy and peachy.’

‘That’s bad.’

‘It’s bad, yes.’

‘Means that whatever fucks with our system fucks with the lot of it.’

‘It would seem so, yes.’

Every now and then those sharing one and the same mood arrive at the same point within it simultaneously, and an agreement is reached that doesn’t need expressing. Right now it means that everyone needs a moment, and no one has to say it. Rezek uses his to push himself to one of the portholes, gazing out. The trouble with the nearest location serving as orientation being several light years away, and many more that lie several hundreds of light years away, and that’s still the closer ones, is that no matter how fast you go, within the limits achievable, nothing out there moves out of frame as long as you don’t change your own orientation. None of all those dots indicate anything to the eye. Hence the whole array of instruments doing it in their stead. Normally. Only that much between them and you being completely lost.

A dread is beginning to envelop him, has done this already for a while now since he’d steadied himself by the porthole, which is what he notices now. Something is going on, all right. All this darkness between them and those lights. Invisible darkness. What else could darkness be. He imagines staying like this, and the others as they are, whatever that is, staying like this from now on, and for all the time to come, and he knows he’s doing it to feel the chill creeping up and over his neck and shoulders. He shudders. And violently shakes it off. The dark place. Keep it together, Rezek.

When he turns he can instantly see that the others have spent this moment in a similar manner. Thinking, doing nothing else, emerging with puzzled faces. Now that he sees it on them, it feels odd.

‘Right. What do we know?’

‘Question preceding that one, do we know anything?’

‘You wanna go back farther, ask yourself how come you’re on this ship. We weren’t drooling helpless until, what is it, ten minutes?’

‘My watch isn’t working.’

‘Mine neither...’

‘Until ten minutes ago, let’s say. The ship started to fail only upon arrival. The gamma radiation hasn’t increased, the ship is well protected against what’s outside, and it seems to me that what’s primarily affected are sensors of any kind. A lot more would be out if it was radiation, so let’s for now assume it isn’t that. And the radiation isn’t that grave. But there is something else out there, and we haven’t found it, even though it’s been clearly inferred by the natural radiation being lensed. When something is being lensed we ought to be able to tell where whatever the thing that’s lensing it should be, if we already can’t tell *what* it is. We pinpointed the location, we got here, but nothing’s here. Nothing we can see. And, thanks to our instruments picking this moment to go on

strike, not in any way. Miraculously the instruments that do continue to work besides, thankfully, our life support system, are those that tell us that lensing still occurs, though besides saying that they can't tell us anything else, like where, what, how and fuck. Lensing radiation can only be done by a source of huge gravity, so it stands to reason that whatever is busy lensing has also something to do with us hanging around blind. Ergo, we're arriving at gravity as the problem.'

Arriving's the word. That's why they're here. Far outside their star system, with the next star not really being far, because using far alone without anything to give the word extra emphasis just doesn't cut it. Here in the proverbial nowhere between the stars, a nowhere of nothing. Only not really. They'd come a long way, not only to this absence of location, but as a species. Much of what had traditionally been called Black Matter is no longer black. Turned out this answer had been the correct one: it isn't only one thing. One unknown particle, or one vaguely known particle that hadn't been recognized as a candidate. What is so deeply involved in tying the universe together, what is responsible for significantly more gravity than they could account for, it's a number of forces at play, a number of the smallest there is, and they had found them out, one by one, a whole sky of new nomenclature, only not all of them. More is implied, more has there to be, because it's still not all accounted for.

Where they are the fabric of space is thick, thicker than it ought to be. But while the new families of smallest are in wildest play with one another, they hardly, if ever, seem to interact with the old ones. The region doesn't feel thicker, it doesn't look or seem thicker, except for what's implied. They hadn't come here out of random whim. The unnamed rest of what they still call Black is best to be observed out here. And after what is merely a week the way they count it back at home, something tangible had crystallised. A bending of straight lines. And they had acted as with a fish pulling on them.

'Gravity. Strong enough to lens gamma radiation.' Rezek's head feels dull, as if before a headache, but a headache that signals it's fine watching him anticipate it. 'We know it's not a Black Hole. Have a way to distinguish themselves. We know it's not a neutron star. Ditto. Have I forgotten something? I feel as if I've forgotten something.'

'Yes.' Niva looks seriously concerned now. 'Our watches have stopped. There, yours, too.'

'That's it, thank you. Our watches have stopped. So the question is, what can it do, strong gravity like that. Can it knock out our system. Can it stop watches. I feel a little light-headed. Or heavy-headed. Yeah, that's it, heavy-headed. I'm gonna lie down a bit.'

'We're in space, Commander.'

'That's true. Then I gonna hang in that corner for a while. Thinking about it.'

'You really think it's a good time to...'

'No, I think you should, Rezek. Give yourself a moment. We'll figure it out.'

Niva actually helps him swing around and gives him a little push. They all watch him floating towards the indicated corner in what's to them a half-seated position, which can look a little silly, but doesn't now. When his spin brings his face towards them his eyes are already closed. Carson's mouth hangs open.

'Has he lost...'

'Some are hit worse than others.'

'By what?'

'I think he got the right idea even before I had, and it just shut him down. For now. Catching knowledge in the corner of your eye. Better to go at it face on.'

Tayla is close to tears.

'I don't know what you're *saying*...'

Niva realizes that Tayla thinks she's going crazy as well, and the second in command-stuff is locking in. Reassure. And good luck, with what she has to say.

'I think nothing has been fried. Nothing's knocked out. Including our watches. Everything works fine.'

Okay. *That* didn't reassure them. Tayla is blinking at her, Carson looks about himself, at everything that seems not to be working. He does it again, with exaggerated emphasis.

‘That’s good.’

‘No. It so isn’t.’

‘Okay, that’s fine, too. Maybe you want to pick *that* corner now, because you’re probably headed for it, anyway. Luckily there are six more for us two to choose from later.’

‘Carson...’

‘Niva. Shit’s not working. Watch. Not working. Spectrometer. Not working. Whatever this thing normally does. Not working. Engine readings..., well, we’ve powered down, and speed’s not registering for the same reason, other than that, everything wonderfully non-functional.’

‘Or they do work, because we’re still moving.’

‘Normally I’d say you lost me, but I have to consider that you lost...’

‘Normally I’d say you’re a little slow, but my point is that you’re not. Quite the contrary. What did Rezek just say? Because he’s right. Huge gravity. Powerful enough to lens gamma rays.’

‘Oh, God...’ Under the right circumstances women can be quicker. Including the wrong circumstances. Tayla is already approaching where Niva is. And Niva knows how hard it is not to crack.

‘We’re way too far out for anything to happen.’ Carson speaks sharply. Anger because of what she’s proposing being silly, or because it’s not?

‘What if we’re not? What if we overshoot it? Hell, we don’t even know what *it* is! How we’re supposed to decide what’s far away enough?’

Carson holds her eyes for an indecisive length.

‘Then why can we still tell about them darn gamma rays? Why is this thing working?’

‘I don’t know.’

‘If multiple instruments stop working, freeze, or whatever, and one or more others don’t, that’s a confirmation of failure.’

Tayla looks from Niva to Carson and back. She very much wants Carson to be right. Tight like a mouse, hands raised to her mouth, arms pressed close to her torso.

‘Come here,’ Carson waves, and Niva follows him to the prow window. ‘There. Anything unusual? All looks fine to me. All I see is stars.’

‘Are you coming out as being able to see wavelengths outside those our eyes can use now?’

‘I’m saying that whatever can cause such lensing should make itself noticeable to us, even just using visible light, yes. I’m not proposing I can explain everything, I’m saying it was an event, and the event is probably over.’

‘What kind of an event?’ Tayla is clutching at everything.

‘I don’t know.’

‘Then how do you know it’s over?’

‘And why are *these* instruments still working, showing us gamma radiation disturbances?’

‘They don’t. Not really. They’re fluttering. About to hitch the same fate as the others. Stuck on an echo. And I want to make sure it won’t happen to anything keeping us alive.’

Says it, and goes to work, starting with another system check.

‘Yeah, why are *those* things still working...?’

‘Carson, listen to me. System check said nominal. It will say the same again.’

‘Listen to yourself. I can promise you, we look out back and it’ll be like looking out front. There’s nothing there. The old man is right. A Black Holes is something we could see. Well, not see, but we’d see what’s around it. A neutron star we could definitely see. If you have any bright idea what else could produce such a gravity, let me know. How can he sleep in a situation like this?’

Rezek has begun to snore.

‘An unspecified event...?’

‘She’s right. We know the effect to be real, that’s why we’ve come. So the source has to be real. The well.’

‘And yet.’ Carson points at the window without ceasing to work.

‘A number of possibilities have been proposed.’

‘Hypotheticals. Along the line of a multiverse.’

Carson is not a friend of the multiverse.

‘So have a lot of things been we’ve since proven to be true and existent.’

‘Niva. Something generating the gravity we’re talking here would be highly condensed, granted, but to us, even at this distance, large enough, it’s visible effects large enough.’

‘Or not.’

‘Nice for an argument, or not.’

‘Or it’s very small.’

‘How small?’

‘Very.’

She thinks she might have him, or is close to it. Somewhere he must know that he’s fighting something.

‘How’s the system check?’

‘All nominal.’

You could hear a hair colliding with a wall. Niva fights down an impulse to look at her watch. A moment later Carson glances at his.

‘Okay. I’ll play.’

‘Suppose that what’s going on is still going on. The effect of enormous gravity. The source, not a passing event, but still there, only we can’t see it. Can’t make it out. Not because it’s invisible, but perhaps we can’t really look at it, immediate environment included. Perhaps because it is small. Small, but of incredible mass.

Bear with me here. The one thing that we do know is that we don’t know what it is. So we can’t speculate that much. Or we can only speculate. We can’t say with certainty what’s too close. We can calculate its mass from what we’ve observed about the lensing, and I strongly suggest that we do it. The computers did a preliminary job before we changed our trajectory here, but we should be able to get to better figure manually from the results. It is massive. But not necessarily big.

If we overshoot. If we overshoot and got too close, we could have landed in its field of influence, and that could mean we’re in fact moving. Moving fast.’

‘How fast...?’

Niva finds it hard to say it, for a number of reasons.

‘Relativistic speed.’

‘Oh God.’

Carson shook his head and gave it a sarcastic laugh.

‘Do I have to list the reasons why that can’t be what’s happening? And you got that from, what, a few machines not working?’

‘What I’m saying is...’

‘You’re saying that they *are* working, just that they slowed down.’

‘That’s right. No matter their function on board, they all work to some extent on the principle of time. On the principal principle, even. Not just clocks and watches. Everything we have on board is a clock in a sense.’

‘Okay, okay, you’re freaking her out.’

‘I’m already long freaked.’

‘Fine. Okay, number one. If we were moving at relativistic speed, we ought to be toast by now.

Okay? We’d be plasma. We got mass. Nothing with mass can move that fast. Law of conservation?’

‘I don’t know how. I’m not saying that I have the story straight. There’s bound to be holes in it.’

‘And why would there be still readings on those gamma rays on this thing?’

‘Same, I don’t know. Maybe something to do with the lensing. Because, I don’t know, we’re already in it together, we and the rays.’

‘And if it bends gamma rays, just imagine what it could do to us. Or wait, *would* do to us.’

Carson spreads his arms and spins round his axis. Yes, he’s alive, in one piece, and inappropriately cynical.

‘Well. Let’s hope you’ll be as jolly in the far future. The very far future. For us, that is.’

This had come from the corner.

‘Glad to have you back. We’ve been brainstorming.’

‘Brainstorming. That’s good...’

Rezek gives himself a tiny push with his left big toe and sails over to them.

‘What was the matter with you...?’

‘Shock, I believe, dear. Think I never been shocked before. Huh, so that’s what that feels like.’

‘Like what?’

‘Like nothing, really. I could observe myself spiralling out, but it felt like the most normal thing in the world. Minute later, and I’d have peed at the porthole and put a cake on my head. So I guess I took myself out before that could happen. Remarkable.’

‘But you’re all good now?’

‘Considering just myself, yeah. Except for a numb head.’

‘I have that, too.’

Niva has felt a growing pressure for a while. Not quite a headache, more like a weight. They’re in micro-gravity, so it has to be a symptom.

‘You guys as well.’

Indeed. They all felt it. Rezek exhaled.

‘Yeah. Well, well...’

‘What did you mean before? About the far future?’

‘I should try and calm you all down, shouldn’t I. Need another of those naps to think about how. I meant that she might be right, dear.’

‘Again, the law of conservation...?’ Carson clearly finds it harder to assert himself before a commanding authority. Even now, because not for the first time, Niva follows from this that Carson doesn’t take her seriously enough. She does outrank him, after all.

‘Is what it is,’ Rezek replies with a nod. ‘What she says doesn’t necessarily violate it.’

‘You’ll have to explain that.’

‘For anyone who’d be watching us from outside, that’s outside the realm of influence, the whole spectacle might be long over. Or just..., frozen.’

‘But we’d have...’

‘Disintegrated, I know. Just that you got the tense wrong. Depends how fast we’d be accelerating. We’ve already come in at some speed. Which was still close to zero, compared. If we’d go from zero to a hundred within virtually or literally no time at all, we might still be at the very beginning of this to even set in. The disintegration, the stripping of our electrons would have happened within such a short amount of time, it hardly amounted to time, but since we’re experiencing it, whether we can wrap our little brains around it or not, to us that moment that hardly lasts still lays far in the future.’

‘How far...?’

‘Very.’

They all react to this. They’d react to it would they read about it in a textbook, with their feet firmly on Earth, because they all have imagination. Tayla is all getting and responding, and not much else. Niva is cautious about moving a muscle. And Rezek has already glimpsed across the edge. He’s become Lear. Once returned from crazy, and you’re good, unless you die.

Carson won’t have it, though.

‘If that’s true, and I’m not saying I’m buying it, but shouldn’t we be affected in the same way? Shouldn’t we slow down as well? Shouldn’t our *thoughts*?’

‘Who says they don’t? How we experience it would be totally different to – hell, to anywhere else in the universe.’

Carson lifts his wrist and taps his watch.

‘Relative to that?’

Niva watches Tayla changing between hot and cold baths. Every objection Carson raises is soul food, every counter sends her nose-diving back into terror.

Rezek doesn’t hide that Carson’s point is a blow, and who’d prefer it otherwise.

‘Well, that’s the question, isn’t it. So far no one had the opportunity to observe how this is playing in terms of mind and psyche. Luckily, or not, we might have a lot of *time* on our hands to muse about that...’

Actually they’re all finding it increasingly harder. The brain is said to feel no pain itself. So headaches must be something else. And they’re still not real headaches, more like a pressure outwards. They’re all feeling it, meaning it can’t be either one of them just having a psychosomatic reaction to the stress.

‘Unless we’re syncing,’ Rezek throws in. ‘You know, like menstruating. What you said the last system check said?’

‘All nominal.’

‘What’d I say? Same as she did.’

‘Or, it means that this is fucked, too.’

‘I’d be happy if it was fucked, I’d be the first to sing and dance, even if it would mean we’re stranded and about to suffocate, I’d prefer that to spending the next local fucking millennium alive. Fuck’s the matter with *you*?’

‘I’m just cleaning..., this.’

Tayla has begun rubbing on a perfectly clean spot near the hatch with all her focus and dedication.

‘I see. Next one for the wacko corner. Niva, you mind...?’

‘Let’s have some rest. You can clean this later, yeah?’

‘...keep her away from the hatch, sharp objects...’

‘I’m really sad...’

‘I know.’

‘Here’s what supports Niva’s hypothesis. Based on the gravity registered before we moved in, at least what I can recall, I tried to finish the calculations, and at that moment the object or whatever that caused it and likely continues to cause it had about the mass of a little over a dozen Jupiters. Remind me to let a moment of reflection pass next time before moving in on something like that. Anyway, as you rightly said, nothing really out here to see, but things like that don’t just vanish, not without wreaking havoc. If it’s there, and if we can’t see it, it’s either invisible, which is unlikely, because there’d still be give-aways, or, as she said, it’s small, real small. And that’s not all.

I might be wrong, because I’m only the skipper on this tub, but if our problem is massive gravity and velocity, a dozen Jupiters might not be enough.’

‘I don’t follow.’

‘It might be building up gravity.’

‘That’s..., restating what you already..., I still don’t follow.’

‘We’d been around for a little while, correct? Suddenly we detect this anomaly, in quite a distance, granted, but...’

‘You’re saying it had just then collapsed.’

‘Yes.’

‘Okay, leaving aside that the inevitably monumental event would have skipped our attention, what you’re saying contradicts the whole premise.’

‘How so?’

‘You have any idea how rapid a collapse into something this dense would be? Skipper?’

‘I do. In an abstract manner.’

‘But you’re saying that the gravity is increasing.’

‘Right.’

‘As we speak.’

‘That’s right.’

‘We’re not speaking rapidly.’

‘You forget that we might already be in a situation in which we won’t perceive all that adequately. I mean, relative to an innocent bystander. By-floater.’

'I can't get her to sleep, Rezek.' Niva has a hand on his arm and is looking back at Tayla as if worried she might turn inside out if she doesn't. Tayla is spinning around her vertical axis, she might be copying what Carson did earlier on. 'She keeps muttering about a snail shell.'

'So. Give her something.'

'You want me to drug her.'

'The hell not? If it puts her to sleep? I mean, temporarily. Sleep helped me. For now. Tell you what, we might soon start considering taking a few doses ourselves, all of us.'

'If we'd all calm down. Please. It's something you're supposed to say.'

'What for? Will it help? Consider for a moment I'm right, perhaps you'll begin to understand how fucked we might be.'

'Might's the word.'

'All the signs are there, everything's pointing at it.'

'You might wanna slow down, maybe the nap hasn't helped. On the one hand you acknowledge that no one has ever experienced such a thing, at the same time you see signs that are a hundred percent tell-tale as if someone's already written volumes of manuals. I'm not saying that nothing has happened. Everything we see can be explained by the ship having been damaged, by system failure, and to equal satisfaction.'

'Relative to this?'

Rezek's watch almost touches Carson's nose.

They're watching Niva administering a sedative to a docile Tayla. For some reason Niva seems angry as she's looking back at them.

'Okay, one by one. Your hypothesis.'

'Ours.' Extraordinary that she should care for credit right now. Or no, rather she lends her support. He's outranked and outnumbered.

'Your hypothesis plural, then. You're saying, the both of you, that there's an object here that caused the extreme gravity by collapsing.'

'Still causing it.'

'Still causing it. And that we accidentally entered the realm of gravitational influence...'

'By overshooting, yes,' Niva cast in.

'...entered it as the mysterious object was collapsing, creating this gravity that's strong enough to lens gamma rays, which would mean it must have quite a considerable mass, but we conveniently or inconveniently missed the beginning of the big event, as well as the object itself before it started collapsing.'

'I'm saying for us it may still be collapsing. Look, I don't know. I'm looking backwards from the effects.'

'That's good that you're saying that...'

'Thank you.'

'Because otherwise you'd sound insane. *Infinitesimal* doesn't even apply for the chance we'd be talking here. I'm not even talking about the sheer coincidence itself, I don't even mention the flight duration between noticing the lensing and our arrival here, which may have been relatively short, but still quite noticeable, you will agree, but I'm also adding our being out here in the first place, and not, and I'd like to stress this, for millions of years already, not quite for an eternity yet...'

'You might wanna save that word for later.'

'We made our careers, each one of us, we were assigned to this mission, we trained, we came out here, and just as we arrived this happens.'

'That last bit was a waste of time, no matter how much of it we got. Same goes for any event we become witness to. A minute later, and we won't be witnesses. That's the meaning of coincidence. It's a darn ol' fucking strange universe, you know that, Carlson, imagine how much stranger it would be without coincidences. I concede, moving on to it just as it collapses, getting caught, it's a stretch, but it's not impossible. And it would explain a lot.'

'So does system failure.'

‘Now I’m imagining spending eternity orbiting the problem with you like this, opposite sides, and round, and round, and round...’

‘The duration of our flight,’ Carson impresses with patient urgency, ‘from safety to relative proximity. It took us hours. *Hours*. A collapse of this mass takes a fragment of a *second*.’

‘The actual, final collapse, yes.’ Niva speaks with calm, her gaze fixed on a random spot below them. ‘The core. An object with a large enough mass will start accreting long before that. You’re talking about Black Holes and neutron stars. You’re talking about something we understand to some little degree. But it’s not a Black Hole, and it’s not a neutron star. So can we please quit talking about it as if it *has to be* something that fits into the less than ten percent of the universe we understand?’

The last decades, Earth time, had served up a staggering acceleration in advancing knowledge. You design the tools, the tools help you explore, with the newly gained wisdom you create more tools, new tools, better tools, and it snowballs from there. From time to time it’s useful to remind oneself of those ninety percent remainder. In moments like this, it can hit you like a hammer.

‘I get it. To hope that we can do something about it we first have to understand it, and to understand something unknown we first have to approach it with an approximate, something similar, by all observation. We won’t do that, we won’t get far, if we won’t have an open mind. Better to know. Entertaining..., the possibility, it won’t hurt us.’

Carson points at the dreaming Tayla.

‘You sure about that?’

How did it begin for the other two? Niva is asking herself this because she doesn’t know much about psychotic episodes, if that’s what it is with Tayla, what it had been with Rezek. The strange, heavy feeling inside her head persists, tantamount to dizziness, but a dizziness confined within the walls of her skull, and that it isn’t really a headache, but keeps being so indulgent, it points to a gradual, slow increasing, and she’s afraid it’ll affect her judgement. Possibly without her being cued in. That’s how it had been with Rezek. It had all seemed normal to him. Good news are, if you’re asking yourself these questions, it means that you aren’t there yet. Means you’re still okay. [] Niva isn’t the only one keeping things in, Carson is trying to conceal his frustration. Earlier on he had suggested, since they’d been talking about ‘doing something about it’, whether they understand *it* or not, that there’s one thing they can and should try no matter what, and that’s getting the hell out of here. For that he has to get the ship running again, running according to their will, and for that he has to find out what’s wrong with it. The ship would patiently reply that it’s working fine, everything nominal, and since it’s a ship it doesn’t once ask why he keeps asking. It doesn’t yet show whether it begins to get to him, except for him muttering that ‘it’s got to be somewhere...’ one time. Rezek had leaned in at this point and advised him to consider that the ship maintaining its status as fully operational and in fact working diligently perhaps meant that it was and did. Carson had turned and smiled a friendly smile that under the circumstances couldn’t have looked friendly if it had come with music, and without averting his gaze had flipped a sequence of switches before pressing two virtual buttons on the screen simultaneously that absolutely require the sequence of switches beforehand. This should have send the ship forward at maximum acceleration, basically catapulting it through the vacuum of space. It didn’t. He spread his arms, and both men turned away from another.

Tayla has woken once from her induced sleep, even though the cocktail shouldn’t have allowed it, was startled out, eyes big for a moment, and Niva, who’d been close, had rushed to see how she was. Her heart had dropped when Tayla had smiled the warmest and craziest looking smile at her, assuring her that it’s gonna be alright, dad’s going to be home soon. They had cuddled while Niva fixed her another dose.

Presently Rezek is sailing through the cabin towards her, perhaps sensing her feeling of uselessness. ‘I been thinking.’ He speaks in a completely unnecessary low voice. ‘If we’re right, if we now exist in time slowed by relativistic velocity, our experience of it might be..., just like normal to us. Hence our ability to move and think, just like normal. Both would measure differently for anyone outside

the affected zone, but for us there's no difference. Would explain it. Would also mean that, other than everyone we knew long gone, we might be just fine. Relatively spoken. In the colloquial manner of speech.'

This time it's Niva raising her wrist. The hands on the watch haven't moved. Not by a nanomillimetre.

Carson has been watching them, now he pushes himself to the work desk with a renewed sense of purpose, folds it down, and takes off his watch. It's an older generation watch, practically an antique, and he takes a set of small utensils and a tiny plastic bag from the fine tool-drawers. He begins unscrewing the back of the watch.

'Jesus...'

'We're not quite there yet.'

'What you think you're doing?'

'Has anyone thought of actually checking the watches? Have a look inside?'

'Put it in a scanner, you loaf! We'll have tiny bits floating all over the place!'

'I'm not going to disassemble it.'

'What you hope to find?' Niva has moved to the desk.

'I'm thinking maybe an EMP could have stopped them.'

'Would it show?'

'Would it show? Would it show? Yes, it would fucking show, on every piece of equipment inside this hull, we'd be sitting in darkness. Remind me where you graduated, Carson, because Caltech my ass.'

'Amazing how they fit in all this.' The watch is open, and Carson is marvelling at it. 'This.'

Niva is moving her face closer to see what he's pointing at. A tiny cogwheel.

'So small... This. This looks like a carousel. Gosh. It's a model. A fun fair model. Do we have any paint here...?'

'Oh shit. Alright, give him a shot. Wait, I'll get it myself.'

Niva puts a hand on Carson's shoulder. His fine dexterity seems intact, he's already taking the cogwheel out and keeps it between his fingertips, with the result of other parts floating out.

'Oh, no, no, no, no...'

Niva rushes to get another small plastic bag, and begins herding in the clockwork's parts.

'You know, I wouldn't be surprised if he has indeed models at home, to put together and paint, ships, war scenes. Always pegged him as this sort of nut.'

'Or,' Carson interjects with the voice of utter reason while adding other clockwork components to the air, 'you might try it yourself. Especially in micro-G. You can let them orbit, adhering paint as they float by. Might help us to solve the problem. A tiny fun fair orbiting in an orbiter.'

Niva's veins go into flash-freeze, and she stops hunting tiny metal bits, as she fears the two men will go at each others' throats, the way they're staring at another, Rezek holding the syringe like a dagger. Their eyes look glassy. Instead Rezek begins to laugh. Short laugh, followed by a small out-pour.

'Ha. Heh-heh, he-eh. You mean like tiny, weeny clowns?'

'Tiny, weeny clowns. You got it, old man.'

Carson and Rezek laugh at the hilarious idea, and Niva has all forgotten about the pieces.

'Please. Please no. No. I don't wanna be on my own in here...'

Carson waves it off, in a manner suggesting that she's the uninitiated know-nothing, and both men continue to laugh happily.

Niva stares out the front. Nothing but stars. For any space-farer an all too ordinary view. And perfectly ordinary. Nothing out of. Turning to the screen readings on her right, and things look quite different. The same gamma-lensing, still ongoing.

A small, transparent pearl crosses her vision. She hadn't noticed that she's been crying. She fishes up the tear, and throws a look over her shoulder at the others. Then she continues.

‘Commander Rhean Rezek, Captain Kent Carson and Flight Specialist Tayla Oumea remain in medical suspension. Carson had initially snapped out of it when waking, he was back to being himself for what I’d estimate a half hour, if my sense of time as experienced can be trusted. I’m keeping them on infusion for now, not a permanent solution, and there’s no reason why I should be spared. Once the meds run out we either get better by ourselves, or it’ll be a monkey house in here, until one of us has the bright idea of checking out how things are outside, perhaps in our underwear.’

She stops the recording to collect herself. The outward pressure inside her head, she’s discovered, differs in quality depending on how she’s orientated. It’s most intense, though not by much, with her face towards the front, then it seems to collect right behind her brow.

She successfully fights down a rush of despair, and clears her throat.

‘I’m still considering Carson being right. That the phenomenon, where it concerns us the most seriously, is largely of psychological nature. Something that has shocked us, causing a shared response, a group psychosis, a kind of folie à quatre, and much of what we experience is imagined. Impressions that are being enhanced by a partial system failure. But if not. Well, we’re done for either way. Too far out here. But should anyone come, not for us to live, it’d be too late, but should you come, stay at a safe distance. Stay outside the realm, however far that may extend. Maintain the greatest possible distance, and monitor. Don’t come close, not until you figured out what is happening here.’

Niva pauses again, this time to think.

‘I can’t rely on myself, so I have to rely on the readings. I have to trust that what I’m looking at is real. The clear bending of gamma radiation, with no means to tell where exactly they’re being lensed. Which can mean that we’re in the midst of it. I don’t know.

If Rezek’s calculations based on the initial measurements have been correct, they no longer apply now, whatever Now is. From what I can tell, the phenomenon causing it must exert a gravitational pull a small star of at least half the mass of our sun would if compressed to its smallest possible circumference after collapsing. Not quite a Black Hole, and Carson remains right here as well, it would show, and doesn’t.

A star of such initial size and mass won’t collapse like that. And there’s nothing out there, nothing to make out, and no way for me to pinpoint its location. All this allows the possibility that Rezek and I have been right all along. That it’s something small. Something between the size of a wardrobe and a pebble. Something we haven’t encountered before, something we didn’t know of. Maybe in theory. It’d be the first time that something is found or confirmed by direct, local experience rather than mere observation.’

Niva realises she’s beating about the bush.

‘What we’re experiencing doesn’t have to make sense. If we’re caught in it, it most likely won’t. Paradoxes and contradictions, not excluded from our universe. They’re as such subject to our limitations. And our minds may only begin to adjust, or fold, with the very onset of the acceleration, with an already hard to imagine speed. But the logic of time dilation is pretty plain.’

Again she has to pause. Breathing heavily. The dull pressure, it doesn’t hurt, but it has grown to become extremely uncomfortable. Feeling unnatural. There’s no such thing. Just alien.

‘Entertaining the possibility of us having been accelerated to relativistic speed, and somehow managing to survive it without being turned into plasma... It sounds just impossible. If we have, or if we’ve somehow found ourself at such a speed without accelerating, if we’ve gone straight from near zero to something approaching a significant percentage of light speed, the difference to the ultimate limit would be all. Anything reaching the speed of light won’t pass time at all. Time would stop, time won’t pass, and a transit from one point to another would be immediate. Not even quick, but absolutely instantaneous. Any speed beneath the speed of light, and be it just by the tiniest quantum-fraction of a fraction of a fraction, and it’d be above the standstill of time. And that’d be time proceeding at its slowest. Right above standstill, sheer infinite slowness.’

There. Wasn't too hard to spell out, was it. Niva frowns as she catches herself padding down her jacket. Then she lets out a little laugh. Has she really been looking for smokes? She'd been smoking once, a short period during her teens. An echo of a memory. Find comfort where you can.

'So perhaps Rezek is right, perhaps everything is in fact still to happen for us. Perhaps we're in the process..., perhaps we're in the slow process of getting turned into plasma. I can tell you. Man. I can tell you, honestly, I can't wait. I'd only like to know what's left for me to do.'

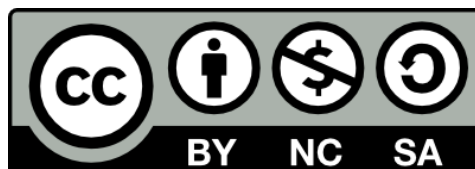
Niva returns to looking out at the stars. At those countless dots of lights. That last bit is what'll be on her mind from now on. How to spend eternity, especially if you don't know if you will. One thing there is, it's getting the message out and back, hoping that it's possible. All she can do.

Except, of course. Here, that's one other thing. The stars. Since the earliest days, the means for orientation. Again and again the last resort, never failing with a clear sky, and son, there's always a clear sky out here. Get a fix on each one's location from here. You need to know their number. Not only those out front. Count them. We've done it since our dawn. Counting stars.

It's proving difficult. Can be helped. Niva looks about herself. The utility drawers. Carson, you looked in the right place, you were only too confused to know what for. She finds a red marker. Works on glass-alloys. Back at the window she calculates the position from where best to look behind her, and draws a short line between two of the far distant dots. She floats back, cocking her head until it's right. It's a start.

The ship receives almost no light, and though it's white it appears like a shadow in the void, mostly inferred by blocking out a patch of stars in its shape. A quiet, peaceful image to no one. It's still. It hangs in the endless sky as if the unforgiving laws of motion don't apply. It would be hard to tell.

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